CURT WELLS

BOWHUNTING in North Dakota

By Curt Wells

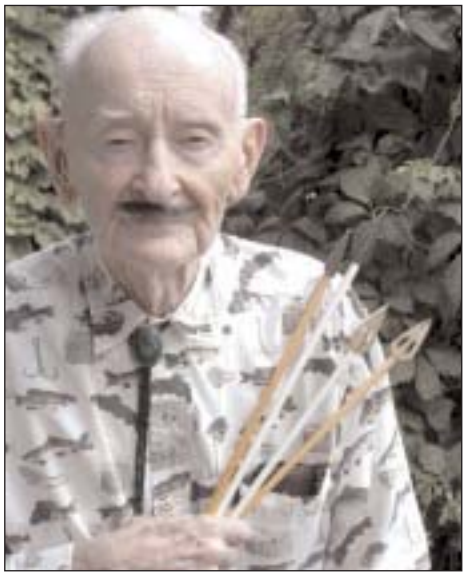
It's estimated the history of archery has spanned 50,000 years. Some say it is the third most important discovery by mankind, behind fire and the wheel. Archery changed the face of the planet because of its impact as a weapon in gathering food and waging wars. Entire peoples were conquered by the bow and arrow, the dominant weapon of war until the firearm was invented.

The history of modern bowhunting in North Dakota is a mere 60 years old and its evolution occurred in reverse fashion, with firearms seasons coming first followed somewhat begrudgingly by the first statewide bowhunting season in 1954.

Of course, the bow and arrow was a weapon of Native American tribes for centuries, but when it comes to hunting with a "stick and string," it's a relatively new thing in North Dakota. Bowhunting was slow to take hold here, as 25 states had legal bowhunting seasons before some pioneering archers in North Dakota began pushing for a season. One of those early pioneers was Dr. Harry A. Wheeler of Mandan.

"It all started back in 1945 when some friends and I convinced Nelius Nelson, the refuge manager at Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge near Jamestown, to conduct an experimental bow season," said Doc Wheeler, 96, a retired OB/GYN who, over the course of a long, distinguished medical career, delivered an astonishing 7,000 babies. "The hunt was held in November and on the first morning we woke up to 40 mile per hour winds, 11 degrees below zero and 14 inches of fresh snow. We couldn't use our vehicles, but we still went out and hunted." It was an unsuccessful hunt, and though the experiment continued for several years, the real goal was a statewide season.

Wheeler, who was mentored into bowhunting by friends living in the Black Hills of South Dakota, led a handful of North Dakota archery buddies in promoting hunting with bow and arrow. He wrote articles and conducted demonstrations in working toward that goal. One such demonstration came during the 1953 North Dakota legislative session. Doc Wheeler and friends hauled a side of beef ribs and a spinal column into a legislative committee meeting and shot arrows into them to demonstrate the effectiveness of the bow and arrow. Evidently, it was quite impressive because later in the session lawmakers voted to legalize bowhunting throughout North Dakota.



WILL KINCAID

Dr. Harry A. Wheeler, Mandan, played an instrumental role in bowhunting in North Dakota.

A bowhunting season was considered for that fall, but at the time a rifle season for deer was being held only every other year and 1953 was an off year. So as not to irritate the rifle hunting community, it was decided to wait until 1954 to hold the inaugural statewide bowhunting season.

Doc Wheeler simply couldn't wait for the 1954 season in North Dakota, so he traveled to South Dakota to take part in its first bowhunting season in the fall of 1953. His hunting buddy, F.J. Banchio of Bismarck, went along and the two men made short drives until both had killed South Dakota whitetails.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HUNTERS

By Ron Wilson, Editor

North Dakota bowhunters have become better at harvesting deer over the years. Hunter success rates have more than doubled in the last three decades, and in 2004 nearly 39 percent of all archers got their deer.

"Bowhunters in North Dakota have some excellent hunting opportunities," said Bill Jensen, State Game and Fish Department big game management biologist. "The density of deer hunters in the state is pretty low, and while we don't have a lot of public land, landowner tolerance for bowhunters is good."

Game and Fish has done its best to create opportunities for archers. Today, with more deer licenses available in the state than ever before, the Department's licensing division has made it possible for bowhunters to have multiple licenses, in some cases, early in the archery season.

"Archers are able to hit their tree stands on the opener or shortly thereafter with several licenses in their pockets," Jensen said. "Licensing has really done a wonderful job making this happen."

As a management tool, Jensen said, bowhunting has its greatest value in situations not conducive to gun hunting, like urban settings where deer numbers have grown beyond tolerance levels. "With a bow, you can go into these urban settings and safely remove deer," he said. "As urban deer problems increase, these opportunities will increase."

North Dakota's bowhunting season has been described by some as one of the longest, most liberal and successful in the nation. "Our primary concern is first the resource, and providing recreational opportunities for hunters and maintaining landowner tolerance," Jensen said.

Bowhunter Success

Starting in 1984, bowhunter success for deer in the state has been recorded every year. For a comparison, however, hunter success was just 16.1 percent in 1974, but nearly 39 percent three decades later.

A look at bowhunter success for deer the last decade:

- 1994 – 34.9 percent
- 1995 – 34.7 percent
- 1996 – 45.5 percent
- 1997 – 31.6 percent
- 1998 – 33.9 percent
- 1999 – 36.3 percent
- 2000 – 42.2 percent
- 2001 – 43.1 percent
- 2002 – 35.4 percent
- 2003 – 43.6 percent
- 2004 – 38.8 percent

The Work Begins

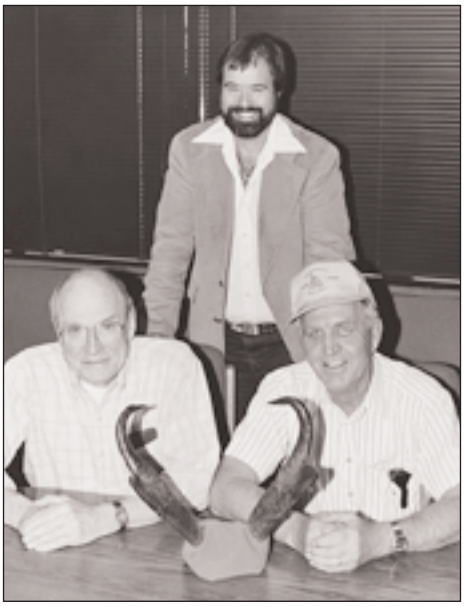
Prior to fall 1954, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials met with the North Dakota Association of Bow-and-Arrow Hunters, today's North Dakota Bowhunters Association. The task was to hammer out a bowhunting season and set regulations. It would be the birth of a strong, cooperative relationship between the two groups that continues today. "The cooperation we got from the Game and Fish Deptartment was phenomenal," Doc Wheeler said. "Dale Henegar was in fisheries in those days, but he played a big part, as did the commissioner, H.R. Morgan."

The new season, it was decided, would be statewide, running October 9-24, with a noon start on opening day. There were two reasons for holding the season before the firearms season. First, bowhunters would have more foliage to hide in when stalking deer. Remember, tree stands weren't used in those days and were, in fact, illegal. And second, it was felt the deer would have time to "settle down" before gun season. This was an unfounded concern because there wasn't enough bowhunting pressure to bother the deer.

Any species, age or sex, of deer was legal. A longbow or recurve (there were no compounds until the late 1960s) had to have at least a 40-pound pull and arrows had to have a wood shaft only, at least 24 inches long.

Nelius Nelson (seated), refuge manager at Arrowwood National Wildlife Refuge, and Dr. Harry A. Wheeler, Mandan, before an experimental bowhunting season in 1945 at the refuge.

GAME AND FISH



CRAIG BIHRLE

These pronghorn horns are from an animal arrowed in 1958 by Archie Malm (right) of Flasher. The Malm buck today ranks as the sixth largest ever taken by a bowhunter. Also pictured in this 1990 photo are former Game and Fish Department commissioner, the late Dale Henegar (left) and Scott Lang, who was representing at the time the North Dakota Bowhunters Association.

Broadheads had to be steel, at least seven-eighths of an inch wide by a half-inch long, without barbs. The entire setup had to be capable of casting an arrow 130 yards.

Legend has it that several of those early bowhunters and some state game wardens were in the field working out some details and there was an abandoned outhouse in the distance. Someone suggested if an archer could hit the outhouse, their bow was a lethal weapon. After the outhouse took several arrows, the distance was stepped off at 130 yards and the rule, believe it or not, was enacted.

Based on data collected from other states, it was anticipated the success rate would be about 3 percent, and that would be considered a successful season. A total of 1,119 licenses were sold that first season for $5 each. All hunters had to register their deer, and by the time the season concluded, 107 deer were killed for a surprising success rate of 9.5 percent, well above the projection.

There was some pre-hunt skepticism by gun hunters who felt a bow and arrow wasn't a lethal weapon. "Some gun hunters were opposed to the bow season and they ran a pretty good fight in the legislature," said Jim McKenzie, retired Game and Fish Department big game supervisor, who was working in habitat development at the time. "The feeling was bow equipment was not lethal enough, however, the post-hunt data didn't bear that out. Not only were wounding rates actually lower than that of gun hunters, but survival rates on deer hit with an arrow were higher than for gun hunters. That answered those concerns and bowhunting was pretty well accepted after that."

The additional hunting opportunity provided by bowhunting was something the Game and Fish Department was seeking. The time it took for each successful bowhunter to tag a deer ranged from 20 minutes to 76 hours, with the average being 21.5 hours. This indicated a bowhunting season could provide significant recreational hunting opportunites without severely affecting deer populations.

Bowhunting in North Dakota was picking up steam.

Then Came Pronghorns

Bowhunting seasons for deer were held every year thereafter, and by 1958 the first pronghorn bowhunting season was held. Nearly 250 licenses were issued to bowhunters, and 17 were filled for a success rate of 7 percent. Keep in mind, this was before the days of faster compound bows, pop-up blinds, decoys and all the hunting knowledge bowhunters can now glean from magazines and television. There was no place to learn about bowhunting in those days, except from other bowhunters or through trial and error in the field. The average shot distance on pronghorns was 49 yards. The longest was 75 yards and the closest was 100 feet. Considering the quality of the equipment back then, that was good shooting.

The first pronghorn taken in a modern bowhunting season in North Dakota was arrowed by Archie Malm of Flasher. It turned out the buck was a world record, a spot it held until 1993. North Dakota bowhunters, in fact, held three world records at one time.

Slow Take Off

The interest in bowhunting was slow to take off for several reasons. As mentioned, there just wasn't the wealth of information available that there is today. Combine magazines, outdoor television, instructional videos and the Internet, and a prospective archer can find all the information he or she needs to acquire the best equipment, learn the habits of game and locate places to hunt without the help of a mentor. Years ago,

without a mentor to lead the way, most hunters just stuck to their guns.

As more seasons were conducted successfully, more states jumped on the bowhunting bandwagon. That meant an increase in the number of experienced bowhunters who could pass on what they'd learned. Archery equipment evolved, becoming more efficient and easier to use. By the late 1960s, the compound bow was patented by Wilbur Allen and bowhunting was launched to the next level. With reasonable effort and the latest equipment, a person could become a proficient bowhunter in a matter of a few months rather than years. License sales took off and bowhunter ranks swelled.

Long-term Dedication

Some bowhunters lose the passion after a period of time. Bowhunting is a time-consuming activity that must be done right or not at all. It takes dedication to stick with it. Some get hooked for life, while others move to easier pursuits.

In 1993, *North Dakota OUTDOORS* ran a profile on Enderlin bowhunter Myron Simonson. At the time, Simonson was preparing for his 40th consecutive bowhunting season and looking to fill his 40th consecutive archery tag. That fall, Simonson managed to keep the streak, which started during North Dakota's first bow season, alive and then extended it through his 41st bowhunting season. Then came a battle with colon cancer.

"I could have shot a doe in early September in 1996, but then I got cancer and went in for surgery on September 23," Simonson said. "I spent 37 days in the hospital and lost 55 pounds. By Christmas I was still pretty weak, but my sons took me out and I slid out of the truck next to a trail. A small spike buck came by, but I couldn't shoot him. He was just too small. It wasn't worth killing him to keep the streak alive."

Now 72, and cancer-free, Simonson is still bowhunting and his record stands at 48 filled tags out of 51 seasons, an enviable tally any bowhunter would be proud to own. "Back in the early days we'd go to Al's Sport Shop on Broadway in Fargo and check out the new bows. I could buy a dozen arrows for $2 back then. I switched to a compound years ago, but now I'm back shooting a longbow and plan to use it this fall," said Simonson, who says he and his sons enjoy pushing deer to one another. "If I had to choose, I'd pick bowhunting over gun hunting every time."

More than a half-century of bowhunting qualifies Simonson, and a number of fellow archers with similar longevity, as long-term, dedicated bowhunters.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Enderlin bowhunter Myron Simonson has filled 48 archery tags in 51 seasons in North Dakota.

THREE WORLD RECORDS

As bowhunting took off in North Dakota, several quality big game animals fell to arrows. Over the span of two hunting seasons, 1957 and 1958, three world record animals – white-tailed deer, pronghorn and mule deer – were killed in North Dakota. At that time, there was no Pope and Young Club, the current record-keeping organization for bowhunters, so records were kept by the National Field Archery Association.

Mule Deer

In 1957, North Dakota bowhunter Pat Sullivan, Glen Ullin, used his binoculars to spot a big muley buck bedded with a doe in some buckbrush about three miles east of Glen Ullin. After a careful stalk, Sullivan, who was North Dakota's state archery champion two years earlier, took advantage of his shooting skills and arrowed what would turn out to be a world record buck.

Sullivan's buck scored 173 5/8 points and was entered in the typical mule deer class in NFAA's record book. The second place buck at that time was taken in Oregon and the third place muley buck was killed in South Dakota. Both were also taken during the 1957 season. That demonstrates the volatility of the record book in those days. Sullivan's buck is now well down the list, ranking no better than 300th.

White-tailed Deer

About two hours after the 1958 bow season opened, Bob Triplett of Tolley was field-dressing a magnificent, 225 pound, 12-point buck that would put his name in the NFAA record book. The buck was pushed to Triplett by his brother, Darrell, as they hunted an area called Swenson Bend on the Mouse River. Triplett's buck scored 163 4/8, eclipsing the previous world record by about 15 points. Triplett actually threw the head and antlers away, but was convinced to keep them by a young fellow hunter. That ensured Triplett would hold the number one spot in the typical record book, at least for awhile.

Keep in mind, the record book was relatively new, so some larger bucks were not entered until later years when hunters

In 1957, bowhunter Pat Sullivan of Glen Ullin, arrowed this mule deer buck that stood atop the record books for a time.

Doc Wheeler is a shining example of long-term dedication. He was even instrumental in bringing wild turkeys to North Dakota. Wheeler collected 14 sharptail grouse and traded them to a pair of game wardens from Texas for a jake gobbler and a dozen hens, which he then released in western North Dakota.

If you bowhunt in North Dakota, you owe a debt of gratitude to Doc Wheeler. The bowhunting "engine" in the state was ignited by his dedication and perseverance. The pistons in that engine are all those dedicated archers who've worked toward the development of bowhunting in North Dakota. They are too many to mention, but they continue to drive bowhunting toward a bright future, while simultaneously working to develop that same passion in young archers.

There are some potholes in the road ahead, dug by anti-hunting groups targeting bowhunting. However, the history of bowhunting in North Dakota, and elsewhere, will continue to be written for many years to come.

CURT WELLS, Wahpeton, is a freelance outdoor writer.

NDBA – A Bowhunter's Champion

In 1952, a handful of dedicated archers, some who weren't even bowhunters yet, formed an organization they called The Association of North Dakota Bow-and-Arrow Hunters. They worked with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department to establish rules for the first bowhunting season in the state in 1954. As bowhunting grew, so did the organization, which eventually took its current name, the North Dakota Bowhunter's Association.

The list of bowhunters who were instrumental in the development of NDBA is long and none would seek recognition, so not listing them is the safe way to go. But it is a dedicated group that has accomplished a great deal on behalf of bowhunters.

"I started bowhunting in 1958 and joined NDBA in 1960," said Paul Shannon of Bismarck. "I was a lobbyist for NDBA during eight legislative sessions. We worked hard to improve the bowhunting seasons and eliminated three requirements that were the law in those days. You had to wear red while bowhunting, your name had to be on your arrows, and you had to show your deer to a game warden. Tree stands were illegal back then and we also got that changed."

Over the years, numerous other regulations have been adapted to transform North Dakota's bowhunting season into one of the longest in the nation. Membership in NDBA is $20 per year and $200 for a life membership.

Contact the NDBA at its website at www.ndbowhunters.org/, e-mail is info@ndbowhunters.org, mailing address is NDBA, P.O.Box 374, Bismarck, ND 58502.

became more familiar with the process. At least two mule deer bucks larger than Sullivan's, and one whitetail buck larger than Triplett's, were killed in earlier years, but not entered until later.

Pronghorn

North Dakota's world record pronghorn stood alone at the top for many years, but it wasn't without some controversy.

It all started in the opening hours of the first pronghorn bow season in North Dakota. The date was September 6, 1958. Archie Malm of Flasher was stalking the prairie on his farm, bow in hand. Malm encountered a monster buck and launched an arrow 50 yards to its mark and into immortality. The pronghorn buck had massive horns – 15 6/8 and 15 7/8 inches long, with circumference measurements at the base of more than seven inches. Ray Murdy, with the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, and official Boone and Crockett measurer, scored Malm's buck at 88 6/8, a phenomenal tally that put the buck on top of the world of archery-killed pronghorn.

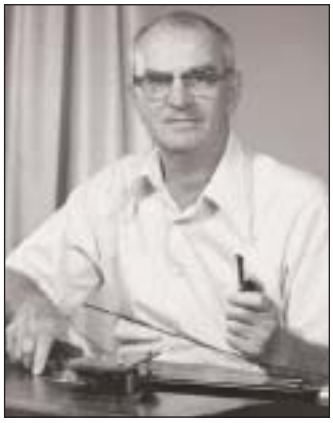
The controversy started more than two years later when the Boone and Crockett Club's panel scored the buck at 85 and entered that score into their record book. After the Pope and Young Club took over record keeping from NFAA in 1975, they wanted to reconcile the discrepancy. They rescored the Malm buck and also came up with 85. Since no one could locate Murdy's original score sheet, the buck's score was lowered to 85, still a world record.

Then in 1983, a buck taken by well-known outdoor writer Judd Cooney also scored 85, establishing a tie with the Malm buck.

The North Dakota Bowhunter's Association went to work to reinstate the Malm buck at its original score. A copy of Murdy's original score sheet was finally located and research was done to determine the amount of shrinkage that might occur in pronghorn horns more than two years old. Glenn St. Charles, the founder of Pope and Young, presented the evidence to the board regarding the Malm buck, and the board voted to reinstate the original score of 88 6/8, vaulting the buck back atop the list.

The record stood until 1993 when a buck was killed in Oregon that scored 90. The current world record is an Arizona buck that scored 91 4/8. The Malm buck still ranks as the sixth largest pronghorn ever taken by a bowhunter.

THE COMPOUND BOW – A North Dakota Connection



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The late Wilbur Allen changed the face of bowhunting with his invention of the compound bow.

Undoubtedly, the single most significant development in bowhunting in modern times was the invention of the compound bow. The man responsible was Wilbur Allen, a Missouri engineer who was dissatisfied with the performance of the recurves and longbows of the day.

"One day, when Dad and my younger brother were walking out from a bowhunt, they came across a doe standing in the ditch," said Steve Allen, Bismarck, one of Wilbur's three sons, and retired North Dakota Game and Fish Department furbearer biologist. "The deer was only 10 yards away to start with. They shot 11 arrows without touching that doe. That afternoon my dad and brother started working on a way to increase arrow speed."

Allen had built bows in the 1920s and '30s, but lost interest. When his three sons came along and wanted to bowhunt, Allen knew he had to work at improving the bow. He began experimenting with pulleys and wheels and cutting recurve limbs off and bolting them to a handle. Just coming up with a wooden handle that could withstand the energy generated by the pulley system was a major problem. It took years of development, but by the mid-1960s Allen had a working prototype. He tried to sell the concept to the archery companies, but none were interested. So Allen decided to build the bows himself.

RON WILSON

In 1966, Allen applied for a patent for his "Archery Bow with Drawforce Multiplying Attachment." The application was accepted, but it wasn't until 1969 that the patent was granted. A prototype was sent to Tom Jennings, then the technical editor for Archery World magazine. Jennings tested the bow, wrote glowing reviews and ended up buying a license from Allen and creating the Jennings Compound Bow company.

"My Dad told me a story about coming across two hunters in the woods who were curious about his newfangled bow," said Allen. "They made fun of the contraption, but one guy agreed to try a shot. He aimed at a 45 degree angle and launched an arrow into the distant woods. He was so impressed, he emptied his entire quiver into the woods just to watch the arrow's speed and trajectory."

Word spread and demand increased. Soon all the manufacturers were buying the rights to build compound bows. In 1970, the National Field Archery Association began to allow compound bows in its competitions and in the bowhunting record books – and the rest is history.

Wilbur Allen died in a car accident in 1979. It's doubtful he could have known the huge impact his invention would generate. Bowhunting would not have the significance it enjoys across the world had the compound not been invented.

BECOMING A BOWHUNT

Becoming a bowhunter involves a relatively modest investment. Yes, you can spend $1,000 on a new bow and accessories, plus hundreds more on tree stands, camouflage clothing, arrows, broadheads and so on. Most bowhunters spend years accumulating such equipment, so you have to start somewhere.

Most bows today are well-designed and for $300 to $400 you can buy a quality compound bow, with accessories attached. Used bows are an option, but a word of caution: Don't buy Uncle Bob's bow unless it fits you perfectly. Your best bet is to visit an archery pro shop to get set up with a bow built for your draw length, an absolutely critical measurement. If you prefer traditional equipment, recurve or longbow, you may want to seek out a traditional archer at a local club for help and advice.

Don't go macho and get a bow with too much draw weight. Seventy pounds is most popular, but to a beginner, 70 pounds will feel like 100. Sixty pounds is plenty for deer and pronghorn, and on a cold December evening you'll appreciate the lower draw weight. I shoot 67 pounds for most of my

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Every bowhunter comes to know an important term – maximum effective range. Finding the maximum distance at which you can confidently make an ethical shot is the purpose of your practice sessions. It's a personal thing, based on equipment choices and skills as an archer. A bowhunter with a longbow and cedar arrows may find his or her maximum effective range is 20 yards. One who uses a compound, carbon arrows, sights and release may feel comfortable at 40 yards. Of course, shooting at a target is nothing like sending an arrow toward a live animal.

If a bow fits well and is tuned properly (get help from a pro shop if necessary), arrows will leave in perfect flight – no fishtailing, no porpoising. Shooting form must include a rock-steady bow arm and crisp release.

Start off shooting at close range, say 10 yards. If you're shooting instinctively, with no sights, it will take weeks or months of practice to train your brain to visualize the trajectory of your arrow. If you choose a compound with sights, it'll still require practice, but you'll have sight pins adjusted to various

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hunting and crank it up to 70 on larger game such as elk.

Accessories, like sights and arrow rests, can be expensive, but don't invest too much until you know bowhunting is for you. That's why a package deal is a good idea.

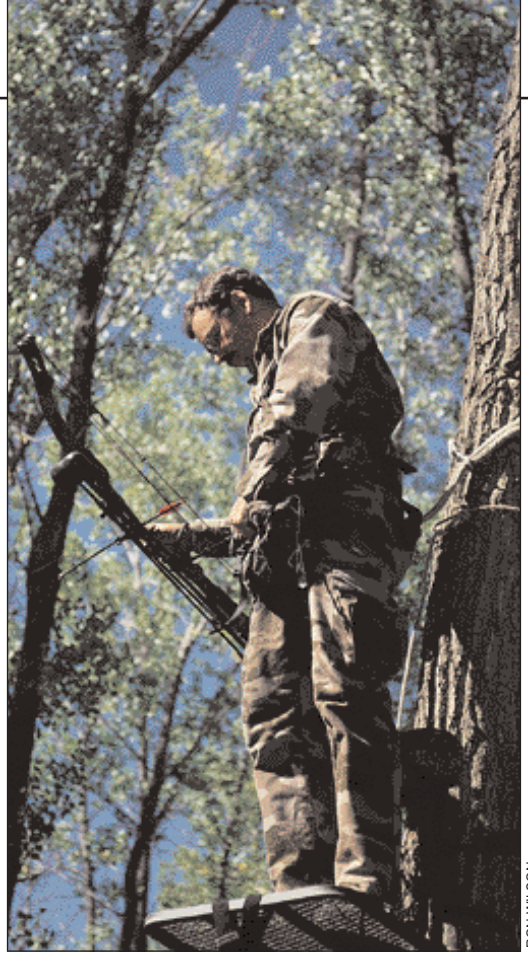
You'll have to choose between aluminum or carbon arrows. Both have their advantages, but I'd recommend carbon because they are durable and cover a wider range of draw weights and lengths with regard to stiffness, otherwise known as spine. Get the wrong arrow spine – too stiff or too limber – and you'll never shoot decent groups, another reason to visit a pro shop for your initial set-up. A dozen arrows costs from $40 to $60.

Choosing a broadhead may give you a headache because there are so many. The most important factor, besides shot placement, is sharpness. If your broadheads are not shaving-sharp, don't go hunting. Make certain you practice with one or two broadheads before hunting as they may not fly the same as your field points. Six broadheads cost about $30.

You can draw and release the bow with your fingers, or a mechanical release, something I would recommend for the beginner. This device clips onto your string and lets you press a trigger to shoot. You get a crisp release, even when wearing gloves, which is a big plus here in North Dakota. A mechanical release costs about $25.

You'll also need comfortable, quiet camouflage clothing, a tree stand or two, and most important of all, a safety harness. Tree steps or ladder steps, fanny pack for camera, binoculars, flashlight, knife, deer calls and other miscellaneous equipment will also be necessary, most of which you probably already own.

As you become hooked on bowhunting, you can work your way into ground blinds, deer decoys, scent-eliminating clothing, plane tickets for far-flung bowhunting trips, taxidermy fees, building costs for a new game room … well, you get the idea.



RON WILSON

This archer has taken the proper precautions by wearing a safety harness in his tree stand.

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distances, such as 20, 30 and 40 yards.

A common myth is if you can hit a paper plate, you're ready to hunt. That's just not good enough. You should be able to do that on your first arrow with the right equipment. Shooting at small bulls-eyes of one to two inches in diameter focuses your concentration. Place five bulls-eyes on a target and shoot one arrow at each spot. That way you won't damage your arrows when your groups become tighter.

With lots of practice and good form, something you'll develop once you build shooting muscles, you should be drilling two-inch bulls-eyes consistently at 20 yards.

If you can keep all your arrows in a two-inch circle at 20 yards, but can't keep them on a paper plate at 30, that tells you your effective range is 20 or 25 yards. If you can smack a three-inch circle at 30 yards and a four-inch circle at 40 yards, you're doing well.

That doesn't mean you've found your effective range. A live animal doesn't stand around when an arrow is released. The reaction time of deer or pronghorn is so quick they can move a foot or more before your arrow gets there, which changes everything. It's called "jumping the string."

At ranges of 15 yards or less, this phenomenon isn't much of a problem. Anything over that and it's a factor. Whether the animal is alert and looking at you, arrow speed, shot angle, wind and shooting skill are all things that must be considered. A laser rangefinder can help you estimate yardage, but the other factors are derived from practice sessions and experience. For example, a 30-yard shot at a deer that is staring at you will seldom hit where you aim, regardless of equipment. If he's grazing and your arrow is quick, you have a higher percentage shot.

When all those variables are considered, only one person – the one behind the arrow – knows what an accurate archer is. Be honest with yourself. If the shot doesn't feel right, it isn't.

Author Curt Wells with a mule deer buck taken in the badlands in western North Dakota.

CURT WELLS